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ABSTRACT

This two day lesson plan for middle school students examines Marco Polo's travels and trade during the Middle Ages. The unit consists of four activities: (1) journal entry/brainstorming; (2) lecture on trade items of the Middle Ages and Marco Polo; (3) simulation of Marco Polo's Journey; and (4) a writing assignment. It provides step-by-step instructions for the teacher, key points upon which to focus, and questions for the students to answer. (Contains extended excerpts for student reading from "The Travels of Marco Polo.") (BT)

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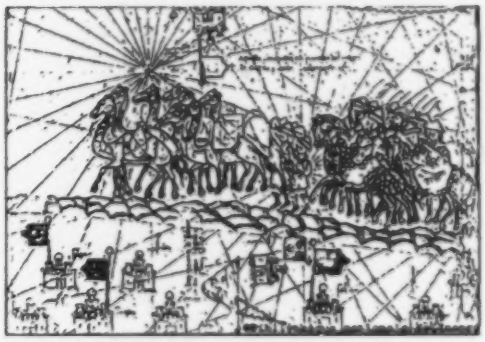
***Cultural Interaction in the Medieval World***

*July 19-23, 1999*

# Marco Polo

**By Carolyn Rinetti**



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# The Travels of Marco Polo

**A two-day lesson designed by Carolyn Rinetti, Pleasanton Middle School**

| | |
|---|---|
| Journal Entry/Brainstorming | Trade Items and Marco Polo |
| Simulation of Marco Polo's Journey | Writing Assignment |

**Activity 1: Journal Entry/Brainstorming**

You can have students do the following activity in their writing journals or logs, or you can use the *Interactive Notebook* of T.C.I. if you use that strategy.

1. Ask students to write the two following questions in their journals. Have them leave 10-12 lines for writing between each question.

Why do people go on journeys?

What are some things that people often bring back home from their travels?

2. Have students write to these questions for approximately five minutes.

3. Ask students to share what they have written. Take responses to each question separately. Write their responses on the chalkboard or on a large tablet. For the first question most students will probably come up with responses as adventure, relaxation, see new things, discovery and hopefully, trade. Try to highlight trade as an important reason for travel in the Middle Ages.

For the second question most students will probably list souvenir-type items. Try to guide them to link those items - clothing for instance - with common trade items of the Middle Ages.

**Activity 2: Lecture on Trade Items of the Middle Ages and Marco Polo**

Students using the *Interactive Notebook* can continue writing the following material in their notebooks. Others can record the material in their binders or where ever you have students keep class notes.

Write the following material on the board or overhead projector and have students copy it:

| Europe | Asia |
|---|---|
| *Animal Skins* | *Paper* |
| *Wool, linen or leather* | *Silk* |
| *Spoiled or rotten food* | *Spices* |
| *Land* | *Gold coins* |

Afterwards, explain the comparison chart and ask students why they think Europeans would want to explore trade routes to Asia. Explain (or remind if you've already taught this) that the Mongols' conquest of Asia opened the continent up to the European travel.

The following is a basic narrative of the Marco Polo story. Also display this information on the board or overhead and have students copy it.

**Marco Polo of Venice and Kublai Khan**

**Venice** - a powerful trading city of Italy

**Mongol Empire** - the Chinese section of the Mongol Empire, ruled by Genghis Khan's grandson, Kublai Khan

1260 - Polos: father and uncle making a trading trip to China

1269 - Marco, father and uncle return to China to bring the Khan Christian missionaries

Marco becomes a government official for Kublai Khan and travels all through China, Southeast Asia and India. He keeps a journal of everything he sees.

Polos return by sea to Venice after 20 years.

Marco is held prisoner during a war with the city of Genoa.

Writes "The Marvels of China" with a fellow prisoner.

**New Ideas from China to Europe**

1. Coal
2. Postal System
3. Paper money

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**Results of Polo's Journey**

1. Increased interest in European travel and trade with China.
2. Made Venice a powerful, rich city.
3. Brought some Christian ideas to China.
4. Italian trading posts in Asia brought the Black Plague.

**Activity 3: Simulation of the Polo's Journey**

Students may continue this activity in a journal or *Interactive Handbook* or you can have them make a small journal to be used only in this activity. Students may do this activity individually or in groups of three to simulate the three Polos.

Set up stations around the room according to the following instructions:
Number each station and have students number the pages of their journals before they go to the stations so that information they record will be in the same sequence. Assign one group per station and have them rotate stations about every five minutes until each group has visited all stations.

**Station 1: The Passport**

Draw the oval shape pictured below in the cover of your travel journal.
Make it as large as possible.
Write these two sentences inside the oval: "By the strength of the eternal Heaven, holy be the Khan's name. Let him that pays him not reverence be killed."

This will guarantee your safe travel through all the lands ruled by the Khans.

**Station 2: The City of Tabriz**

Read Marco's description of the city of Tabriz.

List all the specific items that you would expect to be able to buy in the city of Tabriz. What kinds of fruit? What kinds of precious stones?

Draw a picture of what you think Tabriz would look like based on Marco's description.

**Station 3: The Way of Life of the Mongols**

Read Marco's description of Mongol life.

List 15 facts about the Mongols. Include facts on food, marriage, religion and warfare.

Draw a picture of a Mongol house.

**Station 4: The Palace of Kublai Khan**

Read Marco's description of Kublai Khan's palace and the "enchanters."

On the left side of your journal, list the things that Marco describes that you believe are true.

On the right side of your journal, list the things that Marco describes that you not believe are true OR that you are not sure about.

**Station 5: The Creature**

Read Marco's description of the "creature."

Draw a picture of the creature based on Marco's description.

Explain in three complete sentences how the "creature" is trapped.

**Station 6: Discoveries**

Marco describes "stones that burn like logs." What do you think he is writing about?

This is Marco's description of paper money:

> "With these pieces of paper they can buy anything and pay for anything. And I can tell you that the papers that reckon as ten bezants do not weigh one."

According to Marco, what is the advantage of paper money? Glue a piece of paper money in your journal.

Read Marco's description of the Khan's postal system.
In what ways is the Khan's system like our U.S. Postal system?
In what ways is it different?

**Closure**
When all the students have gone through all the stations, have them return to their seats. Lead the class through a discussion of each of the stations. What did they learn about the

Mongols? What do they think the creature is? What is believable or unbelievable about the description of Kublai Khan's palace?

**Activity 4: Writing Assignment**

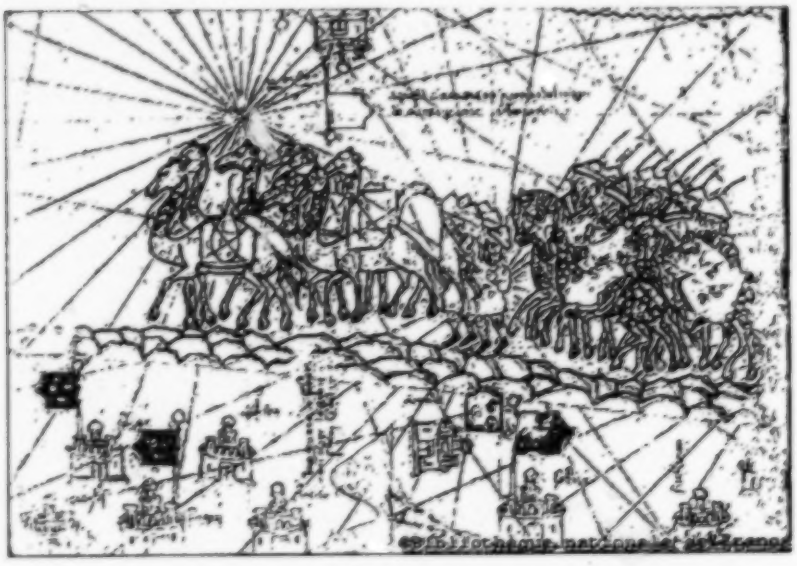
Students can use their travel journals to complete either or both of the following writing assignments.

**Expository Assignment:**

Have students exchange their travel journal with a partner. Using their partner's journal they are to write an account of the journey using ONLY what is written in their partner's journal and not what they remember or wrote. They should organize the information in the order that the stations were numbered and write one paragraph per station.

**Creative Assignment:**

Discuss with students how stories are often exaggerated when they are passed on from one person to another. Explain how Rustichello, the man who wrote Marco's book, sometimes exaggerated to make his book more interesting- and more saleable. As a class, brainstorm a list of adjectives that you would use - spectacular, enormous, gigantic - to exaggerate a description. Using their travel journals, have students write an exaggerated account of the journey with a focus on the use of adjectives from the class list. You could have students share their stories and vote on the one they feel does the best job of telling an exaggerated, but still somewhat believable story.



Caravan crossing the Silk Road. (detail of the map of Asia) The Catalan Atlas Spain, Majorca 14th century.
http://www.bnf.fr/enluminures/manuscrits

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## Marco Polo's Description of the City of Tabriz

"Tabriz is a large city in a province called Iraq, which has many cities and towns. Since Tabriz is the most splendid city in the province, I will tell you about it. The people of Tabriz live by trade and industry; for cloth of gold and silk is woven here in great quantity and of great value. The city is so favourably situated that it is a market for merchandise from India and Baghdad, from Mosul and Hormuz, and from many other places; and many Latin merchants come here to buy the merchandise imported from foreign lands. It is also a market for precious stones, which are fouind here in great abundance. It is a city where good profits are made by travelling merchants . . . The city is entirely surrounded by attractive orchards, full of excellent fruit." The Travels of Marco Polo. Ronald Latham, trans.

# Marco Polo's Description of Mongol Life

Since we have begun to speak of the Tartars, I have much to tell you about them. They spend the winter in steppes and warm regions where there is good grazing and pasturage for their beasts. In summer they live in cool regions, among mountains and valleys, where they find water and woodland as well as pasturage. A further advantage is that in cooler regions there are no horse-flies of gad-flies or similar pests to annoy them and their beasts. They spend two or three months climbing steadily and grazing as they go, because if they confined their grazing to one spot there would not be grass enough for the multitude of their flocks.

"They have circular houses made of wood and covered with felt, which they carry about with them on four-wheeled wagons wherever they go. For the framework of rods is so neatly and skillfully constructed that it is light to carry. And every time they unfold their house and set it up, the door is always facing south. They also have excellent two-wheeled carts covered with black felt, of such good design that if it rained all the time the rain would never wet anything in the cart. These are drawn by oxen and camels. And in these carts they carry their wives and children and all they need in the way of utensils.

"And I assure you that the womenfolk buy and sell and do all that is needful for their husbands and households. For the men do not bother themselves about anything but hunting and warfare and falconry. They live on meat and milk and game and on Pharaoh's rats, which are abundant everywhere in the steppes. They have no objection to eating the flesh of horses and dogs and drinking mares' milk. In fact they eat flesh of any sort. Not for anything in the world would one of them touch another's wife; they are too well assured that such a deed is wrongful and disgraceful. The wives are true and loyal to their husbands and are very good at their household tasks. Even if there are as many as ten or twenty of them in one household, they live together in a concord and unity beyond praise, so that you would never hear a harsh word spoken. They all devote themselves to their various tasks and the care of the children, who are held among them in common. Their mode of marriage is such that any man may take as many wives as he pleases, even up to a hundred, if he is able to support them. The husband gives dowry to his wife's mother; the wife gives nothing to the husband. You must understand that the first wife is reckoned the best and enjoys the highest status. Because they have so many wives, they have more children than other men. They may marry their cousins; and, when a father dies, the eldest son marries his father's wives, excluding his own mother. He may also marry his brother's wife, if the brother dies. When they take a wife, they hold a great wedding celebration.

"I will now tell you of their religion. They say that there is a High God, exalted and heavenly to whom they offer daily prayer with thurible and incense, but only for a sound understanding and good health. They also have a god of their own whom they call Natigai. They say that he is an earthly god and watches over their children, their beasts, and their crops. They pay him great reverence and honour; for each man has one in his house. They make this god of felt and cloth and keep him in their house; and they also make the god's wife and children. They set his wife at his left hand and his children in

front. And they treat them with great reverence. When they are about to have a meal, they take a lump of fat and smear the god's mouth with it, and the mouths of his wife and children. Then they take some broth and pour it outside the door of the house. When they have done this, they say that their god and his household have had their share. After this they eat and drink. You should know that they drink mare's milk; but they subject it to a process that makes it like white wine and very good to drink, and they call it *koumiss*.

"As to their costume, the rich wear cloth of gold and silk and rich aurs-sable and ermine and miniver and fox. And all their trappings are very fine and very costly. Their weapons are bows and swords and clubs; but they rely mainly on their bows, for they are excellent archers. On their backs they wear an armour of buffalo hide or some other leather which is very tough.

"They are stout fighters, excelling in courage and hardihood. Let me explain how it is that they can endure more than any other men. Often enough, if need be, they will go or stay for a whole month without provisions, drinking only the milk of a mare and eating wild game of their own taking. Their horses, meanwhile, support themselves by grazing, so that there is no need to carry barley or straw. They are very obedient to their masters. In case of need they will stay all night on horseback under arms, while their mount goes on steadily cropping the grass. They are of all men in the world the best able to endure exertion and hardship and the least costly to maintain and therefore the best adapted for conquering territory and overthrowing kingdoms.

"Now the plan on which their armies are marshalled is this. When a lord of the Tartars goes out to war with a following of 100,000 horsemen, he has them organized as follows. He has one captain in command of every ten, one of every hundred, one of every thousand and one of every ten-thousand, so that he never needs to consult with more than ten men. In the same way each commander of ten-thousand or a thousand or a hundred consults only with his ten immediate subordinates, and each man is answerable to his own chief. When the supreme commander wishes to send someone on some operation, he orders the commander of ten-thousand to give him a thousand men; the latter orders the captain of a thousand to contribute his share. So the order is passed down, each commander being required to furnish his quota towards the thousand. At each stage it is promptly received and executed. For they are all obedient to the word of command more than any other people in the world. You should know that the unit of 100,000 is called a *tuk*, that of 10,000 a *tomaun*, and there are corresponding terms for the thousands, the hundreds, and the tens.

"When an army sets out on some operation, whether it be in the plains or in the mountains, 200 men are sent two days' ride in advance as scouts, and as many to the rear and on the flanks; that is four scouting parties in all. And this they do so that the army cannot be attacked without warning.

"When they are going on a long expedition, they carry no baggage with them. They each carry two leather flasks to hold the milk they drink and a small pot for cooking meat. They also carry a small tent to shelter them from the rain. In case of need, they will ride a

good ten days' journey without provisions and without making a fire, living only on the blood of their horses; for every rider pierces a vein of his horse and drinks the blood. They also have their dried milk, which is solid like paste; and this is how they dry it. First they bring the milk to the boil. At the appropriate moment they skim off the cream that floats on the surface and put it in another vessel to be made into butter, because so long as it remained the milk could not be dried. Then they stand the milk in the sun and leave it to dry. When they are going on an expedition, they take about ten pounds of this milk; and every morning they take out about a half of a pound of it and put it in a small leather flask, shaped like a gourd, with as much water as they please. Then, while they ride, the milk in the flask dissolves into a fluid, which they drink. And this is their breakfast.

"When they join battle with their enemies, these are the tactics by which they prevail. They are never ashamed to have recourse to flight. They manoeuvre freely, shooting at the enemy, now from this quarter, now from that. They have trained their horses so well that they wheel this way or that as quickly as a dog would do. When they are pursued and take to flight, they fight as well and as effectively as when they are face to face with the enemy. When they are fleeing at top speed, they twist round with their bows and let fly their arrows to such good purpose that they kill the horses of the enemy and the riders too. When the enemy thinks he has routed and crushed them, then he is lost; for he finds his horse killed and not a few of his men. As soon as the Tartars decide they have killed enough of the pursuing horses and horsemen, they wheel round and attack and acquit themselves so well and so courageously that they gain a complete victory. By these tactics they have already won many battles and conquered many nations.

"All that I have told you concerns the usages and customs of the genuine Tartars. But nowadays their stock has degenerated. Those who live in Cathay have adopted the manners and customs of the idolaters and abandoned their own faith, while those who live in the Levant have adopted the manners of the Saracens.

"Let me tell you next of the Tartar fashion of maintaining justice. For a petty theft, not amounting to a capital offence, the culprit receives seven strokes of the rod, or seventeen or twenty-seven or thirty-seven or forty-seven, ascending thus by tens to 107 in proportion to the magnitude of his crime. And many die of this flogging. If the offender has stolen a horse or otherwise incurred the death penalty, he is chopped in two by the sword. If, however, he can afford to pay, and is prepared to pay nine times the value of what he has stolen, he escapes other punishment.

"All the great lords, and other owners of flocks and herds, including horses, mares, camels, oxen, cows, and other large beasts, have them branded with their own mark. Then they turn them loose to graze on the plains and hillsides with no herdsman to guard them. If the herds intermingle, each beast is duly returned to the owner whose mark it bears. Their sheep and rams are entrusted to the care of shepherds. All their beasts are of great size and fat and exceedingly fine.

"Here is another strange custom which I had forgotten to describe. You may take it for a fact that, when there are two men of whom one has had a male child who has died at the

age of four, or what you will, and the other has had a female child who has also died, they arrange a marriage between them. They give the dead girl to the dead boy as a wife and draw up a deed of matrimony. Then they burn this deed, and declare that the smoke that rises into the air goes to their children in the other world and that they get wind of it and regard themselves as husband and wife. They hold a great wedding feast and scatter some of the food here and there and declare that that too goes to their children in the other world. And here is something else that they do. They draw pictures on paper of men in the guise of slaves, and of horses, clothes, coins, and furniture and then burn them; and they declare that all these become the possessions of their children in the next world. When they have done this, they consider themselves to be kinsfolk and uphold their kinship just as firmly as if the children were alive.

" . . . You must know that after Chinghiz (Genghis) Khan the next ruler was Kuyuk Khan, the third Batu Khan, the fourth Altou Khan, the fifth Mongu Khan and the sixth Kubilai Khan, who is greater and more powerful than any of the others. For all the other five put together would not have such power as belongs to Kubilai. And here is a greater claim still, which I can confidently assert: that all the emperors of the world and all the kings of Christians and of Saracens combined would not possess such power or be able to accomplish so much as this same Kubilai, the Great Khan. And this I will clearly demonstrate to you in this book.

"You should know that all the great lords who are of the lineage of Chinghiz (Genghis) Khan are conveyed for burial to a great mountain called Altai. When one of them dies, even if it be at a distance of a hundred days' journey from this mountain, he must be brought here for burial. And here is a remarkable fact: when the body of a Great Khan is being carried to this mountain--be it forty days' journey or more or less--all those who are encountered along the route by which the body is being conveyed are put to the sword by the attendants who are escorting it. 'Go!' they cry, 'and serve your lord in the next world.' For they truly believe that all those whom they put to death must go and serve the Khan in the next world. And they do the same thing with horses: when the Khan dies, they kill all his best horses, so that he may have them in the next world. It is a fact that, when Mongu Khan died, more than 20,000 men were put to death, having encountered his body on the way to burial."

The Travels of Marco Polo. Ronald Latham, trans.

## Marco Polo's Description of Kublai Khan's Palace and the "Enchanters."

"When the traveller leaves this city and journeys north-north-east for three days, he comes to a city called Shang-tu, which was built by the Great Khan now reigning, whose name is Kubilai. In this city Kubilai Khan built a huge palace of marble and other ornamental stones. Its halls and chambers are all gilded, and the whole building is marvelously embellished and richly adorned. At one end it extends into the middle of the city; at the other it abuts on the city wall. At this end another wall, running out from the city wall in the direction opposite to the palace, encloses and encircles fully sixteen miles of park-land well watered with springs and streams and diversified with lawns. Into this park there is no entry except by way of the palace. Here the Great Khan keeps game animals of all sorts, such as hart, stag, and roebuck, to provide food for the gerfalcons and other falcons which he has here in mew. The gerfalcons alone mount to more than 200. Once a week he comes in person to inspect them in the mew. And this he does for recreation and sport.

"In the midst of this enclosed park, where there is a beautiful grove, the Great Khan has built another large palace, constructed entirely of canes, but with the interior all gilt and decorated with beasts and birds of very skilful workmanship. It is reared on gilt and varnished pillars, on each of which stands a dragon, entwining the pillar with his tail and supporting the roof on his outstretched limbs. The roof is also made of canes, so well varnished that it is quite waterproof. Let me explain how it is constructed. You must know that these canes are more than three palms in girth and from ten to fifteen paces long. They are sliced down through the middle from one knot to the next, thus making two shingles. These shingles are thick and long enough not only for roofing but for every sort of construction. The palace, then, is built entirely of such canes. As a protection against the wind each shingle is fastened with nails. And the Great Khan has had it so designed that it can be moved whenever he fancies; for it is held in place by more than 200 cords of silk.

"The Great Khan stays at Shang-tu for three months in the year, June, July, and August, to escape from the heat and for the sake of the recreation it affords. During these three months he keeps the palace of canes erected; for the rest of the year it is dismantled. And he has had it so constructed that he can erect or dismantle it at pleasure."

The Travels of Marco Polo. Ronald Latham, trans.

## Marco Polo's Description of the "Creature."

"In this province live huge snakes and serpents of such a size that no one could help being amazed even to hear of them. They are loathsome creatures to behold. Let me tell you just how big they are. You may take it for a fact that there are some of them ten paces in length that are as thick as a stout cask: for their girth runs to about ten palms. These are the biggest. They have two squat legs in front near the head, which have no feet but simply three claws, two small and one bigger, like the claws of a falcon or a lion. They have enormous heads and eyes so bulging that they are bigger than loaves. Their mouth is big enough to swallow a man at one gulp. Their teeth are huge. All in all, the monsters are of such inordinate bulk and ferocity that there is neither man nor beast but goes in fear of them. There are also smaller ones, not exceeding eight paces in length, or six or it may be five.

"Let me tell you now how these monsters are trapped. You must know that by day they remain underground because of the great heat; at nightfall they sally out to hunt and feed and seize whatever prey they can come by. They go down to drink at streams and lakes and springs. They are so bulky and heavy and of such a girth that when they pass through sand on their nightly search for food or drink they scoop out a furrow through the sand that looks as if a butt full of wine had been rolled that way. Now the hunters who set out to catch them lay traps at various places in the trails that show which way the snakes are accustomed to go down the banks into the water. These are made by embedding in the earth a stout wooden stake, to which a fixed sharp steel tip like a razor-blade or lance-head, projecting about a palm's breadth beyond the stake and slanting in the direction from which the serpents approach. This is covered with sand, so that nothing of the stake is visible. Traps of this sort are laid in great numbers. When the snake, or rather the serpent, comes down the trail to drink, he runs full-tilt into the steel, so that it pierces his chest and rips his belly right to the navel and he dies on the spot. The hunter knows that the serpent is dead by the cry of the birds, and then he ventures to approach his prey. Otherwise, he dare not draw near.

"When the hunters have trapped a serpent by this means, they draw out the gall from the belly and sell it for a high price, for you must admit that it makes a potent medicine. If a man is bitten by a mad dog, he is given a drop to drink--the weight of a halfpenny--and he is cured forthwith. And when a woman is in labour and cries aloud with the pangs of travail, she is given a drop of the serpent's gall and as soon as she has drunk it she is delivered of her child forthwith. Its third use is when someone is afflicted by any sort of growth: he puts a drop of this gall on it and is cured in a day or two. For these reasons the gall of this serpent is highly prized in these provinces. The flesh also commands a high price, because it is very good to eat and is esteemed as a delicacy.

"Another thing about these serpents: they go to the dens where lions and bears and other beasts of prey have their cubs and gobble them up--parents as well as young--if they can get at them."

The Travels of Marco Polo. Ronald Latham, trans.

## Marco Polo's Description of the Khan's Postal System

"Let us turn now to the system of post-horses by which the Great Khan sends his dispatches.

"You must know that the city of Khan-balik is a centre from which many roads radiate to many provinces, one to each, and every road bears the name of the province to which it runs. The whole system is admirably contrived. When one of the Great Khan's messengers sets out along any of these roads, he has only to go twenty-five miles and there he finds a posting station, which in their language is called *yamb* and in our language may be rendered as 'horse post'. At every post the messengers find a spacious and palatial hostelry for their lodging. These hostelries have splendid beds with rich coverlets of silk and all that befits an emissary of high rank. If a king came here, he would be well lodged. Here the messengers find no less that 400 horses, stationed here by the Great Khan's orders and always kept in readiness for his messengers when they are sent on any mission. And you must understand that posts such as these, at distances of twenty-five or thirty miles, are to be found along all the main highways leading to the provinces of which I have spoken. And at each of these posts the messengers find three or four hundred horses in readiness awaiting their command, and palatial lodgings such as I have described. And this holds good throughout all the provinces and kingdoms of the Great Khan's empire.

"When the messengers are travelling through out-of-the-way country, where there are no homesteads or habitations, they find that the Great Khan has had posts established even in these wilds, with the same palatial accommodation and the same supply of horses and accoutrements. But here the stages are longer; for the posts are thirty-five miles apart and in some cases over forty miles.

"By this means the Great Khan's messengers travel throughout his dominions and have lodgings and horses fully accoutred for every stage. And this is surely the highest privilege and the greatest resource ever enjoyed by any man on earth, king or emperor or what you will. For you may be well assured that more than 200,000 horses are stabled at these posts for the special use of these messengers. Moreover, the posts themselves number more than 10,000, all furnished on the same lavish scale. The whole organization is so stupendous and so costly that it baffles speech and writing."

The Travels of Marco Polo. Ronald Latham, trans